

**THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
MIDDLE EAST CONFERENCE**

Contemporary building in the Middle East - what relevance tradition?

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THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

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Dear Martin

I'm writing formally to thank you very much indeed for speaking in Dubai the other day at our conference on Modernity and Tradition.

Your discussion of the relationship of Islam to architecture and the lessons we can learn from the ancient teachings was both disturbing and salutary. It really started the conference in an exciting and provocative fashion and formed the basis of much later thinking in informal gatherings.

In a sense, it informed the motion that was unanimously passed at the conclusion of the proceedings on Wednesday.

I hope that you will consider letting us publish a (mutually agreed) shorter version in a future issue.

Kind regards



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CONSTRUCT

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TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN MIDDLE EASTERN ARCHITECTURE

Keynote Address for the Conference

Tradition and Modernity

Organized by *Architectural Review*,

Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 24-26 May, 1999

Introduction

The conundrum hidden in the topic of this conference is not hidden at all. *Tradition and Modernity* asks us "to have the cake and eat it too". Even a cursory look at the contrasts between the past and today's reality in this region will prove this:

Only 50 years ago, the population of the Trucial States was estimated at 80,000. Today, the UAE has about 2.5 Million residents and attracts another 2 million tourists each year to its festivals, fairs and beach resorts. Traditionally the population here, although always intermingled with minorities from Persia and India, was largely stable. Today, one evening at *Dubai International Airport*, or a stroll through *City Centre Mall*, shows the extraordinary ethnic mix of an unstable and transient ex-patriot majority. In the 40's this was still a largely self-sufficient fishing community that for at least a millenium had carved out small export earnings trough the pearl trade. Now the UAE boasts a globally integrated resource and industry economy. The pre-oil population was sedentary, even counting the movement of nomadic tribes. Today, the frequent flyer points collected by the group in this conference hall alone, illustrate the high degree of mobility this society has achieved. In the past, growth was hindered by extreme climatic conditions. Today, we move about in air-conditioned comfort and irrigate the golf course by remote control.

Nowhere that I know of, has this enormous shift happened faster and with greater force than in the Gulf countries. The grandfathers of our local students were *bedouin*, merchants and fishermen, who went to *Qur'an* school if they had any schooling. Today, their grandchildren attend an American University in Sharjah, buy books from *amazon.com* and some frequent the *Hard Rock Cafe* for extra-curricular learning. All of this is willingly financed by parents who participate in the wealth of this international center of industry, trading, finance and tourism.

Premises

The challenges of change that this society faces on many fronts are staggering. Let me limit the scope somewhat by adopting three premises, each one of them debatable and possibly entirely questionable:

1. Tradition in our context refers to Islamic cultural identity, as reflected in lifestyles, social systems, and particularly artistic and spatial conventions.
2. Modernity and the global onslaught of mono-culture are corroding traditional identity and debasing all its manifestations.
3. Adherence to tradition, however, is seen as a *conditio sine qua non*, a source of general wellbeing, which, once contaminated, threatens survival itself.

Islamic culture has its share of attempts to safeguard the wellspring of tradition at all cost. Some governments, not too far away from this coast, concentrate all their energy on that effort. In the UAE, a more benign attitude to change shapes policies. Easa Al-Gurg, in his recent autobiography *Wells of Memories* describes this attitude as one that realized that

“some degree of change was inevitable and ... the important consideration, for traditional communities like those in the Gulf, was to ensure that change accorded with the traditions rather than collided with them”¹.

Architectural Review, which deserves praise for organizing this conference, has a different focus:

“finding and showing work which, while being economically and technologically viable, does make the world a better place to live in”².

This quest alone gives plenty of room for scepticism. *Economically viable?* For whom? Shareholders which include most in this hall who call a mutual or pension fund their own? *Technologically feasible?* Would the first version of the *Hagia Sophia* or the *Arab Tower* (Jumeirah, UAE) have passed editorial muster? And, *making the world a better place to live in*, better maybe for us here today, in the sumptuous Jumeirah Beach Hotel, but, is a temple to mass tourism a contribution to sustainable architecture?

We recognize that once we scrape at the surface of generalizations, the substrata reveal more inconsistencies, contradictions, false claims and – all in all – more questions than answers. Realizing this dilemma, and having the honor to address a gathering of eminent architects without being an architect myself, allow me to retreat a bit to the safer grounds of the historian.

Consequently, my main attention today will focus on a review of the early tenets of tradition held most dearly in Islamic architecture. I appeal to you to ask yourselves in each instance, to what extent traditional patterns offer relevant strategies for contemporary problems.

Essential Tenets

At the start, it is noteworthy that our view of essentials of Islamic architectural tradition is blocked by the overwhelming bulk of the industrial and information age.

The commonality of form and spiritual reality, probably the single most pervasive denominator of Islamic architecture, is obscured by market-oriented pragmatism and the concomitant homogenizing effect of global practices.

Islam has shaped its worldview according to precepts laid down by the Prophet Muhammad PBBUP, who clearly distinguished between divine and human characteristics, while aiming at all times to relate these spheres. Although God is immaterial and incomprehensible, humanity is called upon, to submit to a divine plan that humans cannot fully know.

The holy *Quran* and the *Sunna* provide the life-code. The code includes numerous community sensitive requirements affecting architecture:

- the day is structured by communal prayer,
- resources are to be shared,
- the fasting month is a social event,
- the *hajj* and *umrah* unite physical and spiritual experience.

Harking back to the Medina community of early Islam may seem to you overly bookish, but the *Urgemeinschaft*, which shaped the initial tenets continues to inform much of the mindset of the traditional society in the Gulf.

Islam, as any traditional culture, is shaped by its relationship to the sacred. The Medina community gives clear guidelines to the important question: How does one capture, represent, and celebrate what is indescribable and immaterial?

The answers are telling:

- the sacred is not to be monumentalized,
- the sacred is not to be abused for ideology and politics,
- the sacred is lived, by repeated actions, walking and perambulations,
- the sacred is mirrored in daily life.

Stefano Bianca, urban planner and life-long student of Islamic architecture, in his book *Hofhaus und Paradiesgarten*³ traces the origin of the Islamic building and planning traditions. This insightful account of the cultural aspects of Islamic architecture is an important source of my comments today.

Bianca illustrates Islamic moderation concerning the sacred, by referring to the *Kaaba* in Mecca, this embryonic cube of masonry that encloses the black stone, fallen from heaven to absorb the sin of the world, and regularly covered by the *Kiswa* cloth.

No other artifact related to Islam exudes a more powerful psychic energy. As the unmovable center of the world, the *Kaaba* directs its energy to any place on earth that faces it. In the *Kaaba*, where the visible, physical world meets its vertical, spiritual axis, we encounter the formal paradigm of the integrated Islamic cosmos.

Directly linked, and subservient to this paradigm are the human gestures that accompany prayer:

- the centering on a spiritual core,
- the required ritual cleanliness,
- the communal rhythms of standing, bowing, prostration, submission, and finally meditative closure.

There is a lot to deduce about Islamic thinking, faith, humanity and architecture from the *Kaaba*. Refusal of monumentality is one. The Western Christian counterpoint must surely be St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Like the *Kaaba* it is found on the tomb of a venerated father of religion, but in marked contrast, it was rebuilt to gigantic scale to accommodate the mausoleum of a living pope, reflecting the imperial ambitions of a universal church.

If centering of space then is a leitmotif of Islamic architecture, other themes reinforce the reference to the unity of the physical and the metaphysical world.

Among them is water, the vital warrantor of survival, originally sparingly used in thin sheets on colored tiles, today often lavishly spent, belying its precious sanctity. This winter we had only three rains in Sharjah. Even that seems a lot when matched with *bedouin* wisdom: Wifred Thesiger tells us that according to his travel companions, one good rain that lasts a day and a night will provide grazing for three or even four years⁴.

And, as water is vital for physical survival, it is vital for ritual purification too. The heavenly garden with a fountain thus serves as metaphor for redemption and paradise. Even in the crowded *suqs* of the city, the drinking niche, with one cup chained to the protective screen or the faucet, is a daily reminder of god's mercy and generosity.

I hope you are beginning to sense, with these examples, how Islamic life and spatial thinking accents the proximity of the sacred and the ordinary.

But it is exactly this proximity of profane and spiritual realms that demands such careful delineation and differentiation between them.

Already in Mecca, the symbiosis of trade and prayer, of *suq* and mosque, invited thoughtful interventions to preserve the purity of the sacred space.

The catalog of such interventions is endless: Transitional spaces, buffer zones, thresholds, gates, angled corridors, high walls and parapets, curtains and screens. Even a slightly raised floor level that signals the place to remove one's shoes, or a mere accent of color can indicate a shift in accessibility, a change in the hierarchy of purity.

Consequently, Islamic space planning employs as sequential system of exclusion, a layering of veils, a series of protective shells which ultimately envelop the chambers of intimacy and worship.

Language too pays tribute to these sensitivities. The concept of *haram*, Linguistically a radix of ambivalent meaning, appears in a variety of expressions, crystallizing in the term *haram* that designates the *Bait Allah* in Mecca.

Associated with *haram* are actions that claim special protection, such as the ritually sacred space of the mosque, or the corresponding private sphere of the family.

Another constant in Islamic culture that has relevance for contemporary planners is hinted at by Ibn Chaldoun. This 14th Century historian from the Mahgreb made (in his *Muqaddima*) two seemingly contradictory observations: 1) The refusal of building is the nature of nomadic tradition, and 2) The origin of cities lies in nomadic life⁵.

I will just briefly address this paradox. The Arab heartland cannot be understood outside the interchange of nomads and urban settlers. The city depends for renewal on the dynamic energy of the *bedu*. Paraphrasing Ibn Chaldoun, the *bedu's* pure faith, his proud code of honor, his solid social ties injects fresh strength into the urban organism. At the same time, once assimilated, these values quickly dissipate, necessitating another cyclical renewal⁶.

You may notice that even in this image of cyclical renewal, the repeated rhythm of circular ambulation rather than linear development, characterizes Islamic constancy of culture⁷.

I have at times had the opportunity to visit with the ruler of Sharjah, on happy and sad occasions. The experience of repetitive, seemingly unchanging ritual that accompanies these visits, as it also pervades official press coverage and photo opportunities, reflects a constancy that western observers often take for ossification.

Examples of ethnic renewal through import or conquest are numerous and range from Turkmen to Mongols and Berbers. The question today is, if the overwhelming influx of the modern-day expatriate and *Gastarbeiter* into the urban society of Islam can contribute to similar renewal.

Ibn Chaldoun's observation, that the refusal of building is at the core of nomadic society reflects the prophet Mohammad's own indictment of architecture. According to *hadith*, he is said to have felt that the least useful endeavor which devours the treasure of the faithful is building⁸.

At the center of this distrust of the activity we celebrate here today, is of course a deeply rooted religious concern: Architecture and building presumes lasting value. Presumes permanence of human artifact: exactly that is presumptuous.

Bianca cites the holy *Qur'an*: "The countenance of the world is the house of God"⁹. Not the building, not the mosque, not the palace of stone or concrete, and surely, not the *Jumeirah Beach Hotel*.

Presumptuous folly lies in wanting to build to last. This highlights another one of the challenges a traditional Islamic value system faces: If impermanence is proscribed by religion, if the faithful are taught that only the eternal is eternal, than only the improvised, the incomplete, the imperfect, is correctly man's lot and destiny.

You may wonder what strict adherence to this tenet would do to the architect's profession. It surely would wreak havoc for planners and those responsible for heritage management.

The injunction against what is man-made, monumental and lasting, helps us to recognize another misconception: If asked to cite prime examples of Islamic architecture, what comes to mind are the famous palaces, mosques, *madrasas* and *mausolea*, from the *Alhambra* to the *Taj Mahal*.

But these venerated buildings are not the essential archetypes! The spirit of Mecca and Medina is most purely represented by the millions of anonymous examples of shelter found over centuries in the transition zones between *bedu* and city folk.

Here, the archetypical Islamic house evolved between the timeless dichotomy of nature and architecture; between the endless, indeterminate, unsecured external space and the protective envelope that grants the inhabitant protection and identity.

Built of local materials, meeting climatic requirements, traditional life forms of humanity found expression in the gesture of enclosing, delineating and embracing space.

I am trying to circumscribe the meaning of this gesture since the English language, to my knowledge, has no wholly satisfactory term for it. In German, the term *Befriedung* alludes to pacifying by enclosure. In Arabic, *sahan* alludes to calmness and peace. Enclosure thus satisfies need of shelter against intrusion of unwelcome elements, be it weather or company.

Time-honored activities accompany this spontaneous homesteading, sanctioned by the Prophet as "giving life to dead land".

Enclosure, of course, begins with the clothes that we cover ourselves with. Shirts and pants, shrouds and veils, caftans and burnus, galabia and thobe illustrate the variety of this generic need. The tent is the next level of enclosure. An artificial second skin. And parallel with enclosure develops division by woven wall hangings, lattice and screens, later greatly refined into artful splendor.

Aftermath

With the death of Mohammad and the resulting decline of legitimation of successive rulers, the celebrated unifying force of the Muslim spirit was weakened in countless ways. I may be over-simplifying history, but for the devout Muslim, all that followed in its wake, is not seen as progress, but as an unavoidable deviation from the ideal.

Why should we worry about the ancient past? Why should we, at the brink of a new millenium and confronted by the challenges of globalism, even bother to pay attention to a history lesson?¹⁰

The answer is simple but possibly unexpected: the unity concept of traditional Islam is *en vogue* again. As Friedrich Ragette observed, there is a surprising congruence between traditional Islamic values and the pronouncements of modern day think tanks¹¹. *Sustainability*, the buzzword of architectural ethics in the Nineties, has evolved to encompass the one-world view of Islam. In that sense, and paraphrasing the Rocky Mountain Institute's definition of sustainability, each planning and building initiative needs to be scrutinized to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹².

The areas deserving special attention in the UAE are many:

- let us revive regionalist solutions which stress vernacular respect for climate conditions, passive cooling devices and reduced energy dependence;
- let us balance consumer access to retailing facilities by supporting small scale market centers, scattered work opportunities and semi-mobile vending;
- let us stop trying to accommodate population concentrations through the erection of vertical slums, those human chicken coops with plumbing which neglect the instinct for society and territoriality;
- let us be guided by William Polk's observation that "People whose surroundings are ugly and barren (are) apt to be unproductive and dispirited...the human spirit is our most precious resource"¹³.
- let architects again wrest from government and contractors the responsibility for designing public housing schemes. Only architects

- are trained to respect the cultural, social and economic complexities of the built environment;
- let us get serious in the pressing needs of waste management on all levels;
 - let us encourage the search for less energy wasting modes of transport and reduce the dependence on the private car;
 - let us get serious in calling for and financing a fundamental renewal of primary education that focuses on responsible stewardship for our planet.

Think global, act regional

Already, the UAE has made headway in the right direction through enlightened initiatives:

- efforts are under way to improve conditions in the worst labor camps that are hidden away from public view;
- the sense for integrated and decentralized government is still alive. Access to rulers and councils of elders is still open. I want to encourage that this time-honored tradition be expanded to include the expatriate population;
- high-impact tourism initiatives have been balanced by provision of well-tended parks and clean, affordable beaches for the general public;
- ambitious projects are directed to restoring natural habitat and protecting endangered wildlife;
- and massive governmental support has been given to develop post-secondary education.

In summary

Islamic tradition as manifest in ritual practice, rules of conduct, community life, and the lasting forms of architecture reveals an inner cohesion that retains validity for contemporary concerns.

The metaphor of concentric shells that enclose and reveal an inner dependency, celebrates the symbiotic relationship between the part and the whole, the local and the global, the physical and the spiritual.

Can indigenous culture withstand or reverse the fragmentation of modernism? Can architecture shoulder its responsibility in the tug-of-war between short-term profit orientation and long-term sustainability?

At the start of this conference, I appeal to each one of you, who represent the profession, the governments, the clients, the media, the educators, and students. I appeal to you to focus your energies on the wellsprings of good design. In the mission of the School of Architecture and Design at the American University of Sharjah we have tried to compress this challenge as follows:

Good design results from the combination of three major contributing elements: a deep understanding of culture, guided by an ethical engagement in society, buttressed by an abiding respect for the creative skills needed to build sustainable material culture¹⁴.

I invite all of you to share in this mission. No less will do.

Thank you.

¹ Easa Saleh Al-Gurg, *The Wells of Memory*, John Murray, London, 1998, p.41.

² *Architectural Review Middle East*, Spring 1999, issue 1, p. 13.

³ Stefano Bianca, *Hofhaus und Paradiesgarten: Architektur und Lebensformen in der Islamischen Welt*, Munich, 1991.

⁴ Alfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*, Longmans, Green 1959, Penguin reprint 1991, p.128.

⁵ Bianca, p.43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ The non-linear development of Islamic culture has previously been termed non-historical. Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* until its sixteenth edition (1954), grouped "Saracenic" with Chinese, Indian and other "non-historical styles".

⁸ Bianca, p.54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ A valuable study into the alienating effects of modern urban planning in a Muslim (Saudi Arabian) context is Saleh Al-Hathloul's recent book *The Arab Muslim City: Tradition, Continuity and Change in the Physical Environment*, Riyadh, 1996, with extensive bibliography.

¹¹ Cf. *Paper Abstracts, International Symposium on Islamic Architecture and Urbanism*, King Faisal University, Dammam, 1980, p.28.

¹² See Yasser Mahgoub, "Sustainable Architecture in the UAE: Past and Present," paper read at CAA-IIA International Conference on Urbanisation and Housing, Goa, India, October 1997.

¹³ William Polk, foreword to Hassan Fathy: *Architecture for the Poor*, The University of Chicago, 1973.

¹⁴ American University of Sharjah, *Catalog 1998-99*, p.59.